

ELECTRONIC RHETORIC OR ELECTRONIC REALITY?



Martin White

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This paper sets out some of the current unresolved issues in the publishing and management of electronic journals, and makes a plea for a more coordinated approach to the identification of emerging problems and solutions.

*Martin White is Managing Director, Intranet Focus Ltd, 12 Allcard Close, Horsham, West Sussex RH12 4AJ
e-mail:
martin.white@intranetfocus.com*

Introduction

This paper is largely based on the keynote paper that was to be presented to the 2001 UKSG conference. The aim of the paper was to raise some of the key issues that are of concern to me in the serials publishing arena, and in so doing, to stimulate discussion of these issues during the conference. I have adapted the presentation for publication but it retains the slightly combative approach of the original paper, high on sound bites and very short on references to the published literature.

I should state from the outset that I have been in love with the scientific journal for over 30 years. The chemistry laboratories at Southampton University in the late 1960s were not as attractive to me as the Library in the Chemistry Department building. At that time there were no courses in the use of the chemical literature, but early in my undergraduate career I had acquired *The Use of the Chemical Literature* by Bob Bottle, and used it as a self-learning guide to Chemical Abstracts, Gmelin and Beilstein. I could not have anticipated having the good fortune to get to know the author well in his subsequent distinguished career at City University.

One of the most interesting and rewarding projects that I have been involved with as a consultant was as a member of the Evaluation Project Team for the Pilot Site Licence Initiative, under the direction of John Fielden from the Commonwealth Higher Education Management Service (CHEMS). At the outset of the project, in 1997, there were very few publishers who were taking electronic journals seriously, and I well remember visiting some US publishers who were highly sceptical of the prospects for electronic publishing. Within two years they had all changed their minds.

Although most of my consulting work is now concerned with intranets, throughout 2000 I was a member of a project team,

which was developing and presenting workshops on how to prepare internet business plans for a major European publisher. At the time of commissioning these workshops, the dot.com crash had yet to happen. During the course of the latter part of 2000 and early 2001 the content of each workshop, each of which lasted a week, had to be changed quite significantly to reflect market and industry conditions, and the changing aspirations of the publisher. From this work I started to gain a better perspective on the critical success factors for an internet business, especially a content-rich business such as publishing.

From e-journal to e-reality

The journal publishing business has had to negotiate very few perturbations in the last three hundred years. The activities of Robert Maxwell, the arrival of the photocopier and the internet have scarcely raised the blood pressure of the industry by more than a few points. Probably the most serious challenge to the continuing profitability of STM publishing was the Follett report, which for the first time raised the spectre of a limit to growth in journal acquisition budgets. However, this is an industry where one of the most avidly read professional newsletters is the Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues, a portent of problems ahead.

Certainly a number of publishers did start to invest in electronic journals, and began to address issues of marketing and support. Among those who deserve credit for taking some risky decisions are Academic Press, Elsevier and Institute of Physics Publishing. However, at the outset, and still to this day in the case of many publishers, there was little sense of realism in the commercial and technical packages that were being offered. This was brought home most clearly to me at a meeting organised by the Pharma Documentation Ring in 1998 in Bracknell, UK, with representatives from some of the leading publishers. There is no need for a detailed account of the meeting, other than to say that the general view of the pharmaceutical industry was that the serials publishers were living on a different planet.

At the heart of the problem is that the channels of communication between publisher and librarian have never been very well managed,

with subscription agents often required to exhibit mediation skills that would be of benefit to the United Nations peace-keeping forces. It does not help that the dynamics of serials publishing defy cogent analysis. No title can be replaced by a title with similar coverage from another publisher, and journals and citation patterns are built primarily on the reputation of the editorial board, rather than the publisher. Many distinguished economists have attempted to unravel the economics of journal publishing, but since the publishers are unwilling (or to be fair unable) to release primary data, there is a lot of elegant extrapolation based on very small sample sets.

One important lesson from the dot.com crash of 2000 is that any company working in the internet economy that does not fully understand the requirements of its customer base, is doomed to fail(1). In the case of serials publishing the lack of knowledge of the requirements of readers cannot just be laid at the door of the publishing industry. Librarians have struggled without success to understand the nuances of the use of serials publications, based on such elegant techniques as placing pieces of paper in bound volumes and seeing which ones had dropped out. (This was a technique tried at Southampton University, prompting a group of chemists at the end of a long lab session to work their way through the library and reallocate the slips of paper!)

To make matters worse, the serials industry works on a yearly life-cycle, and now finds that developments that would normally have taken at least two Frankfurt Book Fairs to emerge into the marketplace are taking place in months.

The challenge for the serials industry is that it has to move from being a traditional print publishing industry to being an e-business, which is not the same as being a publisher of e-journals. Successful e-businesses are agile companies, ready to break all the industry rules in developing new business models. For example, Easy Jet now books around 90% of flights through its web site, having set up the service only about two years ago.

Such a radical repositioning of a business model may not be possible in all sectors of the serials publishing industry, because there is no such industry. It is often overlooked that there is an immense range and diversity of serials publishers in size and in business model, with

many publishers being so closely integrated with their parent organisation or institution that changes cannot be made at the speed be required for long term survival.

Any attempt to develop new business models needs to take into consideration the following key issues

- technology investment and management;
- rights and relationships;
- archive provision;
- universal access;
- usage metrics;
- alliances.

I will look at each topic briefly.

Technology investment and management

Publishers have never been good at investing in technology. As evidence of this, I submit any CD-ROM from almost any publisher, and also most of their web sites. Now the level of investment has to be quite substantial to be able to offer, for example, the range of supplemental data required in chemistry and biochemistry.

However, that is only the visible element of the investment, as publishers also need to invest in back-office systems to manage access to their titles by subscribers and intermediaries, and to reduce to the minimum delays in production. These are quite complex systems, and often have to integrate with legacy systems with little or no opportunity to test off-line. Librarians have been vocal in their demands for usage logs, and yet I suspect have little idea of the systems requirements that are involved.

This investment has to be made against the continuing pressure on price increases in journal titles, and also on the differential between the print and the electronic versions of a title. Funding this investment is even more of a problem for smaller publishers, especially those operating in a not-for-profit environment.

This is just one area where it seems to me that there needs to be substantially better management of information along the publishing chain. This would mean that the inevitable systems problems do not come as a complete surprise to serials librarians, who can then at least do their best to mitigate the problem as far as their readers are concerned.

Rights and relationships

This need for information exchange leads me into a more general discussion of rights and relationships. I am not talking here about intellectual property rights, but the rights that all members of the serials business have in relationship to each other. The links between author, publisher, subscription agent, librarian and reader/author are very close ones. Each is dependent not only on bilateral relationships with each other, but also multi-lateral relationships with all in the publishing chain. These relationships are also somewhat different in the case of corporate libraries and academic libraries.

All too often the discussion lists are full of moans from serials librarians who only find out about a problem when their readers cannot find a publisher's site because a server is down or a URL has changed. Back office problems are also a headache. One message on lis-serials earlier this year was a good example.

"A publisher got our cheque in October but because of a backlog in their accounts department did not process it until February – and expired our electronic access at the end of January. Not only that but they refused to restore it until the backlog was cleared and the cheque banked (even though they knew it was there) or to compensate us for the period of access we lost through their inefficiency."

I am beginning to think that there should be an E-journal Charter that sets out some basic rights, over and above whatever lawyers have included in the licence terms. These might include (just for the sake of illustration)

Publishers

... have the right to survive as long as they are meeting user requirements;

... should not have to read critical messages on email lists about issues that should have first been brought to their attention by the complainant personally.

Libraries

... have a right to get what they have paid for;

... have a right to be informed about technical and other problems at the earliest possible opportunity;

... have a right to expect the journal issue to be loaded correctly and on a timely basis

Although much excellent work on licence terms has been carried out by John Cox on behalf

of all parties involved, I feel that the balance is still somewhat in favour of publishers.

Archives

This is a very complex issue that has still not had the attention it deserves. There are of course many elements of the archive issue, and at present there is a certain lack of both clarity and momentum in discussing and resolving them. As a one-time metallurgist, I am especially aware of the amount of fundamental research on corrosion, fatigue and other topics that was carried out in the first half of the last century, and has not needed to be updated. Ensuring that there is seamless access to this research and to relevant new research published electronically is of fundamental importance to the process of scientific progress. Great store is made of the ability to cross-link between articles, but how do we go about linking to the content of Hoffman's treatise on lead and lead alloys, which remains the definitive work on the subject, despite being published in the early 1950s?

There has been a view that the secondary services do not have a future, now that we can search across the full text of primary journals, but this does a great disservice to secondary publishers. Only a very few publishers are going to be able to create extensive electronic backfiles in the way that the American Chemical Society is doing with the Journal of the ACS.

Another aspect of archiving that is starting to raise concerns, and rightly so, is the issue of first and/or definitive publication. This is especially important when filing or contesting patents. There is a view that the electronic version of a paper can be revised to take account of inadvertent errors. This is something that I have very great concerns over, as a decision may well have been taken on the basis of one version of the paper, which may well be regarded as the incorrect decision on the basis of a later version.

Finally, there is the ongoing issue about how to provide an enduring archive of a title, when the subscription to the printed version is cancelled. Different publishers have different views, and while this is not surprising at this stage, it does cause very considerable planning problems for serials librarians.

Universal access

To most publishers of serials the academic market is without doubt the core of their business in volume and profit. As a result licences and customer support are optimised for this market. I have already alluded above to the problems of corporate subscribers, especially in the pharmaceutical industry, where the requirements to be able to supply copies of articles to support drug registration, and subsequently support to the medical profession, have taken too long to be addressed by many publishers.

Another element of the E-journal Charter might well be that access to electronic journals should not be unnecessarily difficult for user groups, such as doctors, working outside of hospitals and other medical centres, possibly in Third World countries, where the price of an electronic journal may be the equivalent of the annual wage of the doctor.

This raises the issue of subscription pricing against pay-per-article. Certainly as a consultant, working without the resources of a large academic or corporate library, I find it very frustrating that I cannot easily obtain access to an individual paper over the Web. I can buy almost anything else over the Web, but not peer-reviewed information. This is another example of where publishers are still locked into e-journals rather than e-business.

Metrics

Without doubt the world of scientific research owes an enormous debt to Gene Garfield and his development of citation indexing. Now, in theory, the web gives us the chance to find out exactly what papers are being read, and by whom. Publishers should be able to use this information for business planning purposes, and the work of librarians in deciding on subscription cancellations and additions would be much easier. That is the theory.

In practice, we are only just starting to apply some serious thinking to the collection and interpretation of usage statistics, and I am concerned (but not surprised!) that it has taken so long for the parties concerned to begin to work together. The requirements, set out in 1998 by the International Coalition of Library Consortia (www.library.yale.edu/consortia/webstats.html)

seemed to me to be an unrealistic shopping list, without consideration of the implications of what use could, or should, be made of the analyses. The current initiatives from STM and the JISC/PALS Working Group on Vendor Based Statistics should be warmly welcomed and actively supported.

Alliances

Alliances are an integral part of e-business. The way in which the airlines are now working together to provide a seamless service to customers is just one example of this. They still compete, but are also realistic about the need to put customers first, even if, on occasions, this may result in business going to another airline. Customer satisfaction is everything. Publishers have somewhat ambivalent views on alliances, tending to wait until the prospects of success are all but proven before publicly proclaiming fealty to the cause.

I have never quite understood why publishers are so reluctant to work together, especially in the serials business, where titles are not substitutable. Perhaps one of the problems is that as Gordon Graham has remarked, publishers, in common with academics and viticulturists, tend to think by the year(2). In the internet space there needs to be a much quicker reaction to opportunities for collaboration. Cross-Ref seemed to take forever to gain a critical mass. I think that publishers may see all alliances as "for ever", when, in reality, it is a question of being far more pragmatic, and not spending too much time worrying about whether this is the alliance, or may be there will be others. The answer in the e-business world is that there will always be alliances, and publishers need to be ready to be more participative. Librarians also need to realise that this is a culture change for many publishers, especially where they are directly or indirectly managed by a professional society.

Setting out an agenda

I doubt that any one would disagree with me that the problems are going to get worse before they get better. Even when we have some solutions to the e-journal problems (and of course I have only touched the surface of a few in this paper) along

will come e-books. We are very fortunate in the UK to have a number of professional organisations that have worked very hard to identify the true nature of these problems, and find solutions. The UK Serials Group, the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, the Publishers Association, the Association of Subscription Agents and the Joint Information Systems Committee are amongst those who have played important roles in developing better understanding and good practice.

In order to solve a problem, the problem first needs to be identified. One of the delights of the UKSG Annual Meeting is the range of workshops, all of which relate to a current professional issue. Even with the most erudite of workshop leaders, each workshop throws up new concerns and new solutions, and yet these concerns and solutions are only known to the participants in that particular workshop.

To end on a constructive note, I would like to suggest that the UK Serials Group considers maintaining some form of listing of concerns, actions and solutions, perhaps in the form of a listing on the new web site. We need to have a clear agenda for action, but not try to solve problems that are already being solved. The outcomes of the workshops might be one input to this list. The technology certainly exists to have on-line voting on this agenda, so that there was some quantitative indication of importance of the items on the agenda.

Above all there must be some joined-up thinking. We will make no progress at all while we engage on bilateral discussions to solve these problems and then issue edicts to everyone else. One of the best examples of collaborative working is the development of the model licence agreements (www.licensingmodels.com). This is how it has to be in the future, or there will not be a future.

References

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2. Graham, W. Gordon. *As I was saying: essays on the international book business*. London, Hans Zell, 1994. (Hans Zell studies on publishing, 2). ISBN: 1-8738-3601-5